**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-091. FELIX BEFORE PAUL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"* *And as Paul reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee."*

*Acts 24:25*

Felix and his brother had been favourite slaves of the Emperor, and so had won great power at court. At the date of this incident he had been for some five or six years the procurator of the Roman province of Judaea; and how he used his power the historian Tacitus tells us in one of his bitter sentences, in which he says, He wielded his kingly authority with the spirit of a slave, in all cruelty and lust.

He had tempted from her husband, Drusilla, the daughter of that Herod whose dreadful death is familiar to us all; and his court reeked with blood and debauchery. He is here face to face with Paul for the second time. On a former interview he had seen good reason to conclude that the Roman Empire was not in much danger from this one Jew whom his countrymen, with suspicious loyalty, were charging with sedition; and so he had allowed him a very large margin of liberty.

On this second occasion he had sent for him evidently not as a judge, but partly with a view to try to get a bribe out of him, and partly because he had some kind of languid interest, as most Romans then had, in Oriental thought--some languid interest perhaps too in this strange man. Or he and Drusilla were possibly longing for a new sensation, and not indisposed to give a moment's glance at Paul with his singular ideas.

So they called for the Apostle, and the guilty couple found a judge in their prisoner. Paul does not speak to them as a Greek philosopher, anxious to please high personages, might have done, but he goes straight at their sins: he reasons of righteousness with the unjust judge, of temperance with the self-indulgent, sinful pair, of the judgment to come with these two who thought that they could do anything they liked with impunity. Christianity has sometimes to be exceedingly rude in reference to the sins of the upper classes.

As Paul went on, a strange fear began to creep about the heart of Felix. It is the watershed of his life that he has come to, the crisis of his fate. Everything depends on the next five minutes. Will he yield? Will he resist? The tongue of the balance trembles and hesitates for a moment, and then, but slowly, the wrong scale goes down; Go thy way for this time. Ah! if he had said, Come and help me to get rid of this strange fear, how different all might have been! The metal was at the very point of melting. What shape would it take? It ran into the wrong mould, and, as far as we know, it was hardened there. It might have been once, and he missed it, lost it for ever. No sign marked out that moment from the common uneventful moments, though it saw the death of a soul.

Now, my dear young friends, I do not intend to say anything more to you of this man and his character, but I wish to take this incident and its lessons and urge them on your hearts and consciences.

**I. Let me say a word or two about the fact, of which this incident is an example, and of which I am afraid the lives of many of you would furnish other examples, that men lull awakened consciences to sleep and excuse delay in deciding for Christ by half-honest promises to attend to religion at some future time.**

Go thy way for this time is what Felix is really anxious about. His one thought is to get rid of Paul and his disturbing message for the present. But he does not wish to shut the door altogether. He gives a sop to his conscience to stop its barking, and he probably deceives himself as to the gravity of his present decision by the lightly given promise and its well-guarded indefiniteness, When I have a convenient season I will send for thee. The thing he really means is--Not now, at all events; the thing he hoodwinks himself with is-- By and by. Now that is what I know that some of you are doing; and my purpose and earnest prayer are to bring you now to the decision which, by one vigorous act of your wills, will settle the question for the future as to which God you are going to follow.

So then I have just one or two things to say about this first part of my subject. Let me remind you that however beautiful, however gracious, however tender and full of love and mercy and good tidings the message of God's love in Jesus Christ is, there is another side to it, a side which is meant to rouse men's consciences and to awaken men's fears.

If you bring a man like the man in the story, Felix, or a very much better man than he--any of you who hear me now--into contact with these three thoughts, Righteousness, temperance, judgment to come, the effect of such a direct appeal to moral convictions will always be more or less to awaken a sense of failure, insufficiency, defect, sin, and to create a certain creeping dread that if I set myself against the great law of God, that law of God will have a way of crushing me. The fear is well founded, and not only does the contemplation of God's law excite it. God's gospel comes to us, and just because it is a gospel, and is intended to lead you and me to love and trust Jesus Christ, and give our whole hearts and souls to Him--just because it is the best good news that ever came into the world, it begins often (not always, perhaps) by making a man feel what a sinful man he is, and how he has gone against God's law, and how there hang over him, by the very necessities of the case and the constitution of the universe, consequences bitter and painful. Now I believe that there are very few people who, like you, come occasionally into contact with the preaching of the truth, who have not had their moments when they felt--Yes, it is all true--it is all true. I am bad, and I have broken God's law, and there is a dark lookout before me! I believe that most of us know what that feeling is.

And now my next step is--that the awakened conscience is just like the sense of pain in the physical world, it has a work to do and a mission to perform. It is meant to warn you off dangerous ground. Thank God for pain! It keeps off death many a time. And in like manner thank God for a swift conscience that speaks! It is meant to ring an alarm-bell to us, to make us, as the Bible has it, flee for refuge to the hope that is set before us. My imploring question to my young friends now is: Have you used that sense of evil and wrongdoing, when it has been aroused in your consciences, to lead you to Jesus Christ, or what have you done with it?

There are two persons in this Book of the Acts of the Apostles who pass through the same stages of feeling up to a certain point, and then they diverge. And the two men's outline history is the best sermon that I can preach upon this point. Felix becoming afraid, recoils, shuts himself up, puts away the message that disturbs him, and settles himself back into his evil. The Philippian jailer becoming afraid (the phrases in the original being almost identical), like a sensible man tries to find out the reason of his fear and how to get rid of it; and falls down at the Apostles' feet and says, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

The fear is not meant to last; it is of no use in itself. It is only an impelling motive that leads us to look to the Saviour, and the man that uses it so has used it rightly. Yet there rises in many a heart that transparent self-deception of delay. They all with one consent began to make excuse; that is as true to-day as it was true then. My experience tells me that it will be true in regard to a sad number of you who will go away feeling that my poor word has gone a little way into their hardened hide, but settling themselves back into their carelessness, and forgetting all impressions that have been made. O dear young friend, do not do that, I beseech you! Do not stifle the wholesome alarm and cheat yourself with the notion of a little delay!

**II. And now I wish next to pass very swiftly in review before you some of the reasons why we fall into this habit of self-deceiving, indecision, and delay--Go thy way would be too sharp and unmistakable if it were left alone, so it is fined off. I will not commit myself beyond to-day, for this time go thy way, and when I have a convenient season I will call for thee.**

What are the reasons for such an attitude as that? Let me enumerate one or two of them as they strike me. First, there is the instinctive, natural wish to get rid of a disagreeable subject--much as a man, without knowing what he is doing, twitches his hand away from the surgeon's lancet. So a great many of us do not like--and no wonder that we do not like--these thoughts of the old Book about righteousness and temperance and judgment to come, and make a natural effort to turn our minds away from the contemplation of the subject, because it is painful and unpleasant. Do you think it would be a wise thing for a man, if he began to suspect that he was insolvent, to refuse to look into his books or to take stock, and let things drift, till there was not a halfpenny in the pound for anybody? What do you suppose his creditors would call him? They would not compliment him on either his honesty or his prudence, would they? And is it not the part of a wise man, if he begins to see that something is wrong, to get to the bottom of it and, as quickly as possible, to set it right? And what do you call people who, suspecting that there may be a great hole in the bottom of the ship, never man the pumps or do any caulking, but say, Oh, she will very likely keep afloat until we get into harbour?

Do you not think that it would be a wiser thing for you if, because the subject is disagreeable, you would force yourself to think about it until it became agreeable to you? You can change it if you will, and make it not at all a shadow or a cloud or a darkness over you. And you can scarcely expect to claim the designation of wise and prudent orderers of your lives until you do. Certainly it is not wise to shuffle a thing out of sight because it is not pleasing to think about.

Then there is another reason. A number of our young people say, Go thy way for this time, because you have a notion that it is time enough for you to begin to think about serious things and be religious when you grow a bit older. And some of you even, I dare say, have an idea that religion is all very well for people that are turned sixty and are going down the hill, but that it is quite unnecessary for you. Shakespeare puts a grim word into the mouth of one of his characters, which sets the theory of many of us in its true light, when, describing a dying man calling on God, he makes the narrator say: I, to comfort him, bid him he should not think of God. I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet.

Some of my hearers practically live on that principle, and are tempted to regard thoughts of God as in place only among medicine bottles, or when the shadows of the grave begin to fall cold and damp on our path. Young men will be young men, We must sow our wild oats, You can't put old heads on young shoulders--and such like sayings, often practically mean that vice and godlessness belong to youth, and virtue and religion to old age, just as flowers do to spring and fruit to autumn. Let me beseech you not to be deceived by such a notion; and to search your own thoughts and see whether it be one of the reasons which leads you to say, Go thy way for this time.

Then again some of us fall into this habit of putting off the decision for Christ, not consciously, not by any distinct act of saying, No, I will not, but simply by letting the impressions made on our hearts and consciences be crowded out of them by cares and enjoyments and pleasures and duties of this world. If you had not so much to study at College, you would have time to think about religion. If you had not so many parties and balls to go to, you would have time to nourish and foster these impressions. If you had not your place to make in the warehouse, if you had not this, that, and the other thing to do; if you had not love and pleasure and ambition and advancement and mental culture to attend to, you would have time for religion; but as soon as the seed is sown and the sower's back is turned, hovering flocks of light-winged thoughts and vanities pounce down upon it and carry it away, seed by seed. And if some stray seed here and there remains and begins to sprout, the ill weeds which grow apace spring up with ranker stems and choke it. The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and efface the impression made upon your hearts.

Here as I speak some serious thought is roused; by to-morrow at midday it has all gone. You did not intend it to go, you did not set yourself to banish it, you simply opened the door to the flocking in of the whole crowd of the world's cares and occupations, and away went the shy, solitary thought that, if it had been cared for and tended, might have led you at last to the Cross of Jesus Christ. Do not allow yourselves to be drifted, by the rushing current of earthly cares, from the impressions that are made upon your consciences and from the duty that you know you ought to do!

And then some of you fall into this attitude of delay, and say to the messenger of God's love, Go thy way for this time, because you do not like to give up something that you know is inconsistent with His love and service. Felix would not part with Drusilla nor disgorge the ill-gotten gains of his province. Felix therefore was obliged to put away from him the thoughts that looked in that direction. I wonder if there is any young man listening to me now who feels that if he lets my words carry him where they seek to carry him, he will have to give up fleshly lusts which war against the soul? I wonder if there is any young woman listening to me now who feels that if she lets my words carry her where they would carry her, she will have to live a different life from that which she has been living, to have more of a high and a noble aim in it, to live for something else than pleasure? I wonder if there are any of you who are saying, I cannot give up that? My dear young friend, If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee. It is better for thee to enter into life blind than with both eyes to be cast into hell-fire.

Reasons for delay, then, are these: first, getting rid of an unpleasant subject; second, thinking that there is time enough; third, letting the world obliterate the impressions that have been made; and fourth, shrinking from the surrender of something that you know you will have to give up.

**III. And now let me very briefly, as my last point, put before you one or two of the reasons which I would fain might be conclusive with you for present decision to take Christ for your Saviour and your Master.**

And I say, Do not delay, but now choose Him for your Redeemer, your Friend, your Helper, your Commander, your All; because delay is really decision in the wrong way. Do not delay, but take Jesus Christ as the Saviour of your sinful souls, and rest your hearts upon Him to-night before you sleep; because there is no real reason for delay. No season will be more convenient than the present season. Every time is the right time to do the right thing, every time is the right time to begin following Him. There is nothing to wait for. There is no reason at all, except their own disinclination, why every man and woman listening to me should not now grasp the Cross of Christ as their only hope for forgiveness and acceptance, and yield themselves to that Lord, to live in His service for ever. Let not this day pass without your giving yourselves to Jesus Christ, because every time that you have this message brought to you, and you refuse to accept it, or delay to accept it, you make yourselves less capable of receiving it another time.

If you take a bit of phosphorus and put it upon a slip of wood and ignite the phosphorus, bright as the blaze is, there drops from it a white ash that coats the wood and makes it almost incombustible. And so when the flaming conviction laid upon your hearts has burnt itself out, it has coated the heart, and it will be very difficult to kindle the light there again. Felix said, Go thy way, when I have a more convenient season I will send for thee. Yes, and he did send for Paul, and he talked with him often--he repeated the conversation, but we do not know that he repeated the trembling. He often communed with Paul, but it was only once that he was alarmed. You are less likely to be touched by the Gospel message for every time that you have heard it and put it away. That is what makes my place here so terribly responsible, and makes me feel that my words are so very feeble in comparison with what they ought to be. I know that I may be doing harm to men just because they listen and are not persuaded, and so go away less and less likely to be touched.

Ah, dear friends! you will perhaps never again have as deep impressions as you have now; or at least they are not to be reckoned upon as probable, for the tendency of all truth is to lose its power by repetition, and the tendency of all emotion which is not acted upon is to become fainter and fainter. And so I beseech you that now you would cherish any faint impression that is being made upon your hearts and consciences. Let it lead you to Christ; and take Him for your Lord and Saviour now.

I say to you: Do that now because delay robs you of large blessing. You will never want Jesus Christ more than you do to-day. You need Him in your early hours. Why should it be that a portion of your lives should be left unfilled by that rich mercy? Why should you postpone possessing the purest joy, the highest blessing, the divinest strength? Why should you put off welcoming your best Friend into your heart? Why should you?

I say to you again, Take Christ for your Lord, because delay inevitably lays up for you bitter memories and involves dreadful losses. There are good Christian men and women, I have no doubt, in this world now, who would give all they have, if they could blot out of the tablets of their memories some past hours of their lives, before they gave their hearts to Jesus Christ. I would have you ignorant of such transgression. O young men and women! if you grow up into middle life not Christians, then should you ever become so, you will have habits to fight with, and remembrances that will smart and sting; and some of you, perhaps, remembrances that will pollute, even though you are conscious that you are forgiven. It is a better thing not to know the depths of evil than to know them and to have been raised from them. You will escape infinite sorrows by an early cleaving to Christ your Lord.

And last of all I say to you, give yourselves now to Jesus Christ, because no to-morrow may be yours. Delay is gambling, very irrationally, with a very uncertain thing--your life and your future opportunities. You know not what shall be on the morrow.

For a generation I have preached in Manchester these annual sermons to the young. Ah, how many of those that heard the early ones are laid in their graves; and how many of them were laid in early graves; and how many of them said, as some of you are saying, When I get older I will turn religious! And they never got older. It is a commonplace word that, but I leave it on your hearts. You have no time to lose.

Do not delay, because delay is decision in the wrong way; do not delay, because there is no reason for delay; do not delay, because delay robs you of a large blessing; do not delay, because delay lays up for you, if ever you come back, bitter memories; do not delay, because delay may end in death. And for all these reasons, come as a sinful soul to Christ the Saviour; and ask Him to forgive you, and follow in His footsteps, and do it now! To-day, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.

[A Message to the young.]